

# **PBLworks Survey of Interest and AERA Research Conference Grant Report May 10, 2012**

## **Background**

In January of 2012, Jason Ravitz, Research Director at the Buck Institute for Education, invited known members of the PBL research community to participate in an initiative dubbed *PBLworks* to advance research in the area of K-12 PBL. The timing of this initiative was spurred by the growing energy and enthusiasm for methods of teaching and learning that foster 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. *PBLworks* involves two phases—first, development of a vetted collection of professional research studies, and second, the convening of a relatively small group of active or influential PBL researchers for knowledge sharing and collaboration.

The goal of *PBLworks* is to collectively identify the most important research challenges and opportunities, and where appropriate, to develop standards and guides for replication. The intended outcomes include a series of published articles, a shared collection of research designs and instruments, a synthesis of findings on important topics, and possibly a book. Key strands of research include PBL project planning, classroom management, assessment, teacher preparation, technology, and school alignment.

As a first step in establishing the *PBLworks* membership and road forward, a survey of interest was distributed. Initially, 35 people were invited, via email, to participate in the survey. Adding people recommended by the original invitees, 80 people were invited in total. Of those, 48 people from universities and non-profit or private organizations throughout the U.S. and abroad completed the survey and indicated they were either “ready to contribute” or “need more information.” Survey responses were highly valuable in illuminating concerns, desires, and ideas regarding PBL research efforts. Those responses are summarized below.

Leveraging the survey responses, a proposal was developed and—on February 15, 2012—submitted to the American Education Research Association (AERA) in application for a research conference grant. If obtained, the grant will support the initiative by funding a working session for *PBLworks* members at the AERA meeting in 2013, several regional meetings, and an online collaborative environment for the group. A copy of the final proposal is included in Appendix A of this report.

## **Data Summary**

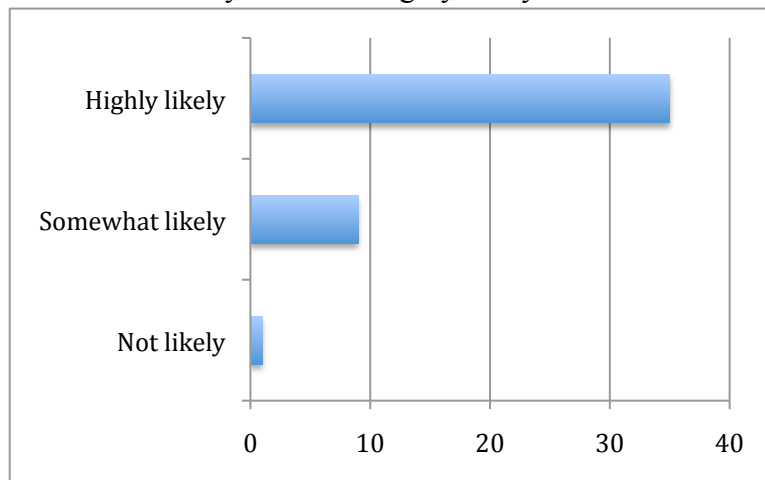
### *1. PBLworks Participation Interests*

The survey asked participants to indicate their level of interest (on a 4-point scale) in seven types of *PBLworks* participation which included joint research projects, seeing work of others, sharing work, posting work in online forum, ongoing dialogue, live chats, and publishing opportunities. The average level of interest for all types of participation was 3.2, indicating a high level of

interest in all types of participation. Specific items that researchers offered to contribute to the group include articles, observation instruments and codebooks, interview protocols, survey instruments, rubrics, PBL case problems, and related publications.

## *2. AERA 2013 Attendance*

The chart below summarizes responses to the question, “if we receive funding to pay for people to spend an extra day at AERA 2013 in Atlanta, how likely are you to take an additional day to meet with other PBL in K-12 researchers?” As the chart illustrates, the overwhelming majority indicated that they would be highly likely to attend the meeting.



## *3. Interest in PBL Issues*

Researchers were asked to indicate their level of interest (on a 4-point scale) in 10 specific PBL issues., which included: pre-service, inservice professional development, designing, classroom management, teacher perceptions, student perceptions, accountability outcomes, other student outcomes, reforms, and technology. The average level of interest for all 10 issues was 3.2, indicating a high level of interest in all of these issues. Other interests identified included the design and use of PBL in informal environments, online professional teacher networks, cross-context research on PBL as a pedagogical culture, and the relationship between PBL and self-regulated learning.

## *4. Common Features and Concerns*

One open-ended question that proved to be fruitful asked respondents to describe common features of or concerns about PBL that might help unite research efforts. This question garnered some clear threads that may serve to define a research agenda for the group and in fact, “help unite our efforts.” The specific threads identified include barriers to PBL use, clarifying what PBL is and how it works, identifying best practices to enable quality experiences, ensuring fidelity of implementation, student skills and benefits, and research concerns.

The thread with the greatest number of responses (27) was identifying PBL best practices. Some of the practices noted included:

- Generation of quality problems and projects
- Promoting metacognition, self-regulation and self-direction
- Creating authentic learning environments
- Improving outcomes for diverse learners
- Creating effective rubrics

The thread with the second highest number of responses (13) was centered on barriers to PBL use. Some of the barriers identified included:

- Standardized curriculum
- Teacher skills
- Teacher concerns (classroom time, planning time, ability of students to self-regulate)
- Integrating PBL within a culture of high-stakes testing and accountability
- Lack of school conditions that support learner-centered approaches

The third most commonly cited thread (11) was clarifying PBL and how it works. Example issues in this category include:

- Developing common definition or definitions of PBL
- Describing how to develop driving questions that envelope curriculum standards.
- Developing a model of teaching and learning processes
- Dispelling the myth that PBL is “fluff”

The fourth greatest number of responses (6) related to student skills and benefits. Sample concerns included:

- Student efficacy and habits of mind developed through PBL
- The relationship between PBL and self-regulated learning or self-directed learning
- Real-world connections and collaboration
- Transfer of problem-solving skills
- Leveraging intrinsic interest and real-world contexts
- Whether (or how) PBL works for all students

Other threads related to measurement concerns, such as measurement of student outcomes beyond test scores and measurements of implementation. Concern for the fidelity of PBL implementation was another thread.

## Next Steps

AERA recently informed us that our proposal was not accepted for funding. We are currently working to establish the online collaborative environment for *PBLworks* and examining alternative means of supporting the initiative. We will contact you when we have additional information. In the meantime, if you have questions or suggestions, you may contact Jason Ravitz at 415-883-0122, ext. 310 or at [jason@bie.org](mailto:jason@bie.org).

## **Appendix A: AERA Grant Proposal**

(insert proposal here)